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SUBJECT: BASRAH'S DATE PALMS PROJECT OFFERS JOBS, POSSIBILITY OF DEVELOPMENT

¶1. (U) This cable was cleared by PRT Basrah.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: The Basrah provincial government has begun implementation of a \$10 million project to restore the date palm plantations of Basrah, creating 2,000 immediate jobs. The director of the Basrah Date Palm Research Center, Mohammed A. Hameed, told poloff November 26 that about 140,000 offshoots are being planted on approximately 1250 hectares of land owned by about 1,000 farming families. He said because individual farmers own the plantations, the farmers have economic incentives to maintain them. The date palms create a microclimate that is conducive to cultivating a variety of fruits and vegetables and raising livestock, according to Hameed. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (U) On November 26 the director of the Basrah Date Palm Research Center, Mohammed A. Hameed, told poloff that the Basrah provincial government has begun implementing a \$10 million project to restore Basrah's date palm plantations, once one of the world's leading producers of dates. The director stated that 63,000 palm offshoots were planted in 625 hectares of land in October and early November and that a second phase of planting of about 77,000 offshoots is expected to take place from February to August 2007 in another 625 hectares. With maps and diagrams, Hameed showed that the planting areas are all near Basrah, adjacent to the Shatt al-Arab River or one of its tributaries. According to Hameed, the soil preparation and irrigation canal repair tasks have created about 2,000 jobs, which are filled mainly by young, unemployed men from Basrah and retired soldiers.

¶4. (U) Hameed described how the date palm offshoots are planted in privately owned plots inhabited by about 1,000 farming families, who receive training in the use of fertilizer and pesticides to maintain the plantations. He said that since individual farmers own the plantations, the farmers have economic incentives to maintain them, unlike many other infrastructure projects that have fallen into disrepair in Iraq. He added that the provincial government's agriculture office employs experts to support the local farming community's needs, another sign that the date palm restoration project will be self-sustaining. The palm trees will require four to five years to produce marketable fruit and offshoots. In the meantime, Hameed said, the repaired irrigation system will allow farmers to plant other fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes, cucumbers, alfalfa and corn, to supplement their incomes.

¶5. (U) Danish agricultural adviser Ole Jepsen, a member of the Basrah Provincial Reconstruction Team is considered the godfather of the date palm restoration project. Jepsen, through long months of work was able to bring together government, scientific and business groups in order to make the date palm project a success. Included in these groups were Veterinary State Company and Basrah Agricultural College which gave insight to the process in which the date palm plantations create

microclimates that are conducive to growing high value fruits and vegetables and raising livestock and fodder crops. In meetings with poloff, Jepsen described how he saw possible spinoff industries from the date palm plantations, such as date processing and packaging at market requirements and meat processing. Danish engineer Niels Elsnab, who supervised and oversaw the construction of irrigation sluices and culverts in the fields around Basrah, stated that authorizations were needed from the government ministries including the Water Resources Ministry (WRM) due to the irrigation canals that siphon water directly from rivers. In addition, Elsnab told poloff that cooperation and coordination was required between the WRM, which has jurisdiction over main canals, the Agriculture Ministry, which controls secondary irrigation systems watering public lands, and the Basrah Provincial Council, which handles issues related to the irrigation of private lands.

16. (U) Comment. The date palm restoration project's creation of 2,000 jobs in a city awash with unemployed youths holds the potential to play a key role in the long-term development of the local economy. Before the Iran-Iraq war, 30 million date palms grew around this city. Saddam ordered the many of the plantations hacked down during that conflict to create fields of fire for his artillery. The date palm project is a welcome developmental sign in a city often noted for only its violence and economic stagnation. End comment.

GASTALDO